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ABSTRACT

This study provides information on obstacles facing homeless youth in school. Research occurred in four diverse New England cities. Researchers collected detailed case histories on youth age 10-15 years who were currently homeless or who had recently been homeless. Data came from staff of local youth agencies, government officials, and youths attending a 90-minute focus group discussion on their personal experiences and observations. Focus group participants also completed a five-page questionnaire. Most participants were female and white, though some were African American and Hispanic American. All had attended public school at some time, and over half were unemployed. Most were living in federally funded transitional living programs, state-run independent living or parenting teen programs, or foster care. The study looks at the impact of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. Results indicate that the academic experiences of responding youth were overwhelmingly negative. Common problems included transportation, inability to catch up after missed classes, clashes with authority figures, and perceived lack of respect from school personnel. Some respondents were depressed and anxious. For youth living outside of McKinney-funded districts, the Act had little impact on educational changes or experiences. Remedies to this situation are discussed. (Contains 22 references.) (SM)

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A Different Kind Of Smart

A Study of the Educational Obstacles Confronting Homeless Youth in New England

Melanie Wilson *Alison Houghton*

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so generously told their stories

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From January to September 1999, New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services conducted research on the educational obstacles facing homeless youth in four New England states. New England Network, a nonprofit education, research and policy organization working on behalf of children and youth, undertook the project for two reasons. First, the inability of homeless youth to enroll and succeed in public school has long been a serious issue for social service agencies, particularly those who work with homeless adolescents or youth in foster care. Even more important, however, was the impending reauthorization of portions of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, the massive piece of federal legislation that forms the cornerstone of American policy on the homeless and that specifically is responsible for protecting educational opportunities for the nation's homeless children and youth.

The purpose of the research is to describe the complicated journey homeless youth typically take through the educational system, with particular focus on the obstacles that often prevent them from attending and graduating from mainstream schools. By illuminating their experiences in detail, and by recommending measures to correct and strengthen the federal protections described in the McKinney Act, New England Network seeks to improve the chances that the nation's poorest youth can move into adulthood confidently, fully prepared to meet its increasingly complex challenges.

The academic experiences of the homeless youth interviewed for this study were overwhelmingly, though not entirely, negative. Commonly cited problems involved securing transportation to and from school; an inability to catch up after missed periods of school; clashes with teachers and other authority figures; and a perceived lack of respect and compassion on the part of teachers, secretaries, registrars and other school personnel. Some homeless students were visibly depressed and anxious; all felt that at the very least, they had experienced life disruptions and traumas that set them apart from other teens their age.

For the youth in this study who lived outside of McKinney-funded districts, the McKinney Act, which is supposed to lower barriers to school enrollment and attendance, had little impact on educational chances or experiences. Few people - either in schools or in homeless youth agencies - know about the law or what it requires of schools. Furthermore, schools traditionally exercise autonomy in setting their own policies and are resistant to making changes that will only increase their burdens. Finally, state coordinators, the officials in each state responsible for carrying out provisions of McKinney, are, for a variety of reasons, often unable to fully carry out their duties, meaning that enforcement of McKinney is minimal.

Remedies include **increasing the federal EHCY appropriation to $50 million; increasing support for state coordinators and making them accountable for their work on behalf of teenagers; requiring schools applying for McKinney funds to show they will collaborate with local homeless agencies; requiring all schools to enroll homeless students immediately; and requiring all schools to put make-up programs in place for students who have missed periods of school. A reauthorized McKinney Act should also recognize that the needs of homeless teenagers are more complicated than those of children, and that teenagers therefore require a range of services - such as comprehensive case management - not currently available to them. Finally, foster-care youth are so similar to homeless youth that, for the purposes of the Act, they too should be considered homeless.**

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Homeless Youth: Who They Are

Homeless youth have been defined as individuals under the age of eighteen who lack parental, foster or institutional care (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1999); in fact, it makes sense to raise the upper age limit to 21, by which time society generally expects all youth to have finished high school and begun taking up the tasks of adulthood. Some homeless youth have left home on their own or been kicked out by their parents; others have been emancipated or have "aged out" of state foster care systems. When such youth have no place else to go, they end up on street, in emergency shelters or transitional living programs, in cars or in abandoned buildings, or, probably most often, in the homes of friends. Whatever their particular circumstance, homeless youth are always in crisis, and almost always on their own. Rarely is any adult relative available to protect them or help them meet their most basic needs, and they generally lack the capacity to do it themselves.

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The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that 730,000 Americans are homeless each night - approximately two million people each year, 25% of whom are under the age of 18. A 1995 study by the US Department of Health and Human Service suggests that approximately 300,000 youth are homeless each year and another 2.8 million have run away at least once in the past year (NCH, April 1999). In New England, estimates of youth homelessness are on the rise. In Massachusetts, the number of older youth seeking emergency shelter had risen dramatically in recent years and is expected to double in 1999 (MHSA, 1999). In 1998-99, Vermont provided long- and short-term shelter to nearly 600 runaway and homeless youth and services to more than 1,000, a 175 percent increase since 1992 (VCHRYP, 1999). Six thousand youth from New England contacted the National Runaway Switchboard in 1998, and 20 percent of them had been on the run for more than three months (NRS, 1999).

However, these figures almost certainly underrepresent the scope of the problem. The first issue contributing to the inaccurate estimates is the difficulty in identifying and tracking homeless youth. Youth often are too ashamed or embarrassed to admit being homeless, or they purposely keep their living situation secret for fear that state agencies will intervene and put them in foster care. Data collection problems are compounded by schools' inaction on the problem, limited federal funding for street outreach, and the lack of serious state or federal requirements that such youth be located.

In addition to this large but undercounted group of truly homeless teenagers, there is another subset of homeless youth not covered by traditional definitions of homelessness: youth in foster care. Approximately 520,000 children live in foster care in the United States, a 48 percent increase since 1982 (DHHS, 1999; Homes for the Homeless, 1999). Half lived in the homes of non-relatives, and more than a third had been in foster care for more than three years (DHHS, 1999). By definition, foster children have no permanent home, but are instead bounced from one caregiver to the next with limited continuity or stability. Furthermore, foster care, which is meant to be a short-term fix, often goes on for years. In all, 20,000 teenagers a year age out of the system; two years after leaving it, fewer than half have jobs or have finished high school, and only 20 percent are supporting themselves (Boyle, 1999). The problem is not getting better; indeed, it is getting worse. The number of youth age 16 or over in foster care has risen 25 percent

since 1992 (Boyle, 1999).

It is widely acknowledged that foster care and homelessness are complexly intertwined. More than a decade ago, the National Alliance to End Homelessness noticed a strong correlation between the homeless population and individuals who had been in the foster care system as children. Upon further investigation, the group concluded that former foster children were indeed over-represented in the adult homeless population (NCH, 1999). A study of more than 300 homeless adults in Minnesota found that 39 percent had lived in foster care as children (Piliavin, Matsueda, Sonin & Westerfelt, 1990). Research has also shown that homeless adults are far more likely to have children who themselves live in foster care, and that if a homeless parent had been in the foster care system as a child, the chances their children would do the same were even higher (Roman & Wolfe, 1997; Homes for the Homeless, 1999).

Consequences of Homelessness

Homeless children are in fair to poor health twice as often, go hungry twice as often, are born with low birth weights four times more often, and are four times more likely to have asthma than their sheltered peers (Better Homes Fund, 1999). Predictably, they take these problems and others - including the risk of drug dependency, HIV and pregnancy - into adolescence with them. Indeed, substance abuse is the primary health problem among runaway and homeless youth, and due to a variety of risk factors, including serious family conflict, school failure, and parental and peer drug use, runaway and homeless youth are considered to be at higher risk for addiction than other youth. Aside from the physical problems that accompany homelessness, homeless children and youth suffer emotionally as well. Nearly one-third of homeless youth will be treated for at least one major mental illness that significantly impacts their daily living skills, and studies have consistently found higher rates of major depression and suicidality among homeless teenagers than their non-homeless peers (Better Homes Fund, 1999; National Network for Youth, 1998).

As youth shelter workers readily admit, education is usually the last priority for homeless youth and the social service agencies that help them. Homeless children are developmentally delayed four times more frequently than their peers and are twice as likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities. Due to either these problems or excess absences and relocations, homeless children are also twice as likely to repeat a grade in school. Frequent moves have a well-known deleterious effect on academic and peer development, and have profound implications for the 40 percent of the young homeless population that changes schools twice a year and the 28 percent that changes schools three or more times a year (Better Homes Fund, 1999). Even homeless youth who manage to stay in the same school have trouble attending on a daily basis, complete homework nightly, and succeeding in an academic environment without support. Indeed, in some youth shelters, dropouts rates for homeless youth are over 75 percent (NEN, 1999).

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The Government's Response

In response to the growing social and political recognition of the problem of homelessness, Congress in 1987 passed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, a portion of which established the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program. McKinney affirmed that homeless children and youth have the same right to a free, appropriate public education as other students, but recognized that, due to a variety of obstacles - including residency and guardianship requirements and the availability of health and academic records - they often were unable to access and succeed in school. The

new law required states to lower such barriers so that homeless children and youth could successfully participate in school (Hightower, Nathanson & Wimberly, 1997). It also established formula grants to the states to fund programming for homeless students in particularly needy districts. The law's definition of homelessness was broad, and for the purposes of the EHCY program, was interpreted by the federal Department of Education to include runaway, "thrownaway" and abandoned children and youth, including those living in any shelter or transitional setting. Even children and youth living with friends could, depending on their circumstances, be considered homeless. Children in foster care, however, were excluded, unless they were in temporary emergency placements due to lack of foster homes.

There is one barrier to enrollment that school and state officials cannot report: the behavior problems and learning disabilities that make many homeless youth undesirable students and that can prompt overburdened schools to reject them if a legitimate way can be found to do it.

To administer the grant program, provide education and technical assistance to schools, and generally assist states in carrying out the provisions of the EHCY, the law also established the office of EHCY state coordinator.

The McKinney Act has generally been considered a success. A recent evaluation of the EHCY program finds that almost all states have revised school policies regarding homeless children and youth, and that as a consequence attendance rates for homeless students have risen from 50 percent in 1987 to 86 percent in 1995 (Anderson, et al, 1995.) State coordinators themselves say that issues such as residency requirements and lack of previous school records are now minor barriers for homeless students (NASCEHCY, 1997).

But although the McKinney Act and its subsequent revisions have been well-intentioned, homeless students still face serious obstacles to finishing school. The most frequently cited barriers for such students are now guardianship and immunization requirements, transportation problems and school fees. Poor health and an inability to obtain adequate food, clothes, and school supplies are also cited as continued areas for concern, along with the inaccessibility of special education evaluation and placement, the difficulties surrounding participation in after-school events and activities, and the lack of available counseling and psychological services (NASCEHCY, 1997).

But another issue at least as important is one that school and state officials do not report: the behavior problems and learning disabilities that make many homeless youth undesirable students and that can prompt overburdened schools to reject them if a legitimate way can be found to do it. While bias against potentially difficult students, especially when they come from out of district, is sometimes understandable, it is probably the most pervasive problem homeless students face and the one hardest to regulate.

Youth in particular face "extreme barriers to success," according to the 1995 EHCY evaluation commissioned by the federal Department of Education. Fear of aggressive teenagers has prompted some schools to reject homeless youth as liability problems, and even McKinney-funded districts have developed few academic support programs for teenagers (Anderson et al, 1995). Recent episodes of school violence will presumably make schools even more reluctant to accept troubled adolescents, and indeed already seem to be doing so (see p. 14).

The shortcomings of the McKinney Act are magnified by the extremely limited funds appropriated to implement it. Though Congress authorized $50 million for EHCY in 1990, the program has never been fully funded; indeed, in 1998 Congress appropriated just $28.8 million, the same level as four years earlier (NCH, 1999). Congress' lack of investment in the EHCY program has profound implications. A mere 3 percent of all local educational agencies in the United States receive McKinney funds, and of those, most receive no more than $60,000 a year. In New England, where states are either sparsely populated or richer than average, the figure per district is usually

far less - only $16,500 per grantee in Connecticut, for instance (see Appendix A). State estimates of the total number of homeless students thus far exceed the number served by McKinney-funded programming. Furthermore, many state coordinators work only part-time and therefore cannot do the kind of program development, including critical outreach and education, that would make enrollment and success in school more likely for students living outside McKinney districts (Anderson et al, 1995).

For FY 2000, President Clinton has requested $31.7 million for the program, an increase in current funding but still significantly less than the amount advocates say states must have if they are to do a better job of educating homeless students. Meanwhile, Congress' apparent intent, based on recent House and Senate budget bills, is to again level-fund the program. While adequately funding EHCY is the obvious and only solution to some of the problems experienced by homeless children and youth, many other less costly changes can also be made that would render McKinney a far more effective law (see Findings & Recommendations, p. 30.)

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THE PROJECT

The goal of this study is to help policymakers, advocates, educators and members of the public understand the obstacles facing homeless youth in school. Even though we look closely at provisions of the Stewart B. McKinney Act, the piece of federal legislation that protects the educational rights of homeless children and youth, the study is not an evaluation of McKinney nor of the schools or social service agencies profiled here. It is instead an effort to describe the real struggles - sometimes dramatic but often frustratingly mundane - of homeless adolescents as they try to navigate their way through school, and to detail the scope and adequacy of national and state efforts to assist them.

Almost none of the youth had parents who were willing or able to take responsibility for them. Indeed, a majority both in and out of state systems had been removed from abusive parents at one time or another.

We chose four cities in New England - Fitchburg, Mass.; Waterbury, Conn.; Derry, N.H.; and Braxton, Maine[1] - as study sites. The cities differ dramatically in size and ethnic composition, and vary in the number and sophistication of services they offer youth. In the first three cities, we identified, with the help of a cooperating local youth agency, 10 to 15 youth who were currently homeless or who recently had been. We gathered detailed case histories on the youth from agency staff who had worked closely with them, and then asked eight to 10 of the youth to attend a 90-minute focus group to discuss their personal experiences and observations. Finally, we asked the focus group participants to fill out a five-page questionnaire.

In Derry, N.H, we collected information on five youth; four filled out questionnaires but, due to lack of availability, none were interviewed.

Altogether, we collected information on 35 homeless youth, 26 of whom we interviewed in the focus-group settings and 30 of whom filled out the questionnaires. Of these 30, about half were connected with state child welfare systems but were, because of multiple foster-care placements and short-term emergency placements, essentially without a fixed home. The rest had been kicked out by their parents, had run away or had aged out of state systems and were now on their own. Almost none of the youth had parents who were willing or able to take responsibility for them. Indeed, a majority both in and out of state systems had been removed from abusive parents at one time or another.

The young people we studied ranged in age from 14 to 20; their average age was 17.5. Almost three-quarters were female. Eighteen were white; eight were black and two were Hispanic. Eleven, or about one-third of the youth, had first left home between the ages of 14 and 16; another third left - or, more typically, were removed by social workers - before turning 14. All had attended public school at some point; on average they had completed the 10th grade. Just over half the youth had dropped out of school, though a few had gone back later to graduate. A third of the youth were or had been involved in a GED program. Over half the group was unemployed, including many who were out of school; nine worked part-time and four worked full-time.[2]

At the time of the study, most of the youth were living in federally funded transitional living programs, state-run independent living or parenting teen programs, or foster care. A few were staying temporarily with friends. About a quarter had lived for some period of time on the street, in a car or in some other similarly tenuous circumstance. All, housed or not,

[1] Braxton is a pseudonymous name for the Maine location highlighted in this study.

[2] Not every questionnaire was entirely completed.

had been moving from place to place for a good part of their lives. The youth were not randomly selected (we chose youth who were still associated with agencies and thus were available to participate in focus groups), but according to agency personnel they were representative of the total client population of the agencies we visited. In other words, we believe both them and their stories to be typical of homeless youth in general.

In addition to youth, we spoke with more than two dozen state officials, school personnel, case managers and executive-level agency staff. Given the nature of the research, it is not surprising that agencies were most interested in participating and schools least interested. The resulting information, while as objective and accurate as we can make it, reflects those very different levels of cooperation.

Throughout this study we have changed the names of the young people we interviewed. We have also changed the name of the city and agency in Maine, at the agency's request. The other three sites are identified. The decision to name those cities was a difficult one, and required us to balance the desire to protect the often-shaky relationships between youth-serving agencies and local schools against our determination to hold all parties, including schools, accountable for their practices. We have not named particular schools for one reason: Given the complexity of the issues and the unwillingness of school systems to disclose details of individual cases, specific grievances voiced by youth and others are impossible to validate. Nevertheless, the sheer number and similarity of complaints alone would seem to lend them credibility.

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THE YOUTH

FITCHBURG, MASSACHUSETTS: 'NO ONE WANTS TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ME'

Fitchburg, an old mill city in the rolling hills of north central Massachusetts, saw its prosperity fade twenty years ago when its paper and yarn industries moved south. Now, with a population of 41,000, the city has all the hallmarks of a troubled community: growing numbers of immigrants, disproportionately high numbers of old and young residents, a high teen pregnancy rate, a high poverty rate, a high substance abuse rate. LUK, an agency once specializing only in youth but now serving all ages, is a key link in the city's thriving network of social service agencies.

Like many teenagers before him, Brian ended up at LUK, a social service agency in central Massachusetts, after a long and convoluted series of moves. He had been taken by state social workers from his mother, a drug addict, when he was a toddler, and had lived in foster homes until he was a teenager. At 16, he decided to go live with his father in the Midwest. Though he enrolled in school there, he attended only a few months before heading back to Massachusetts. Upon his arrival he found himself in the Department of Youth Services' lockup as a runaway, and again, this time under DYS auspices, he attended school for a few months. Finally, swept in on a tide of state paperwork, he landed in the long-term residential program at LUK. Though it was already November, Brian was eager to start school. The school, however, didn't seem to feel the same way about him. Surely, officials told his LUK caseworker, he belonged somewhere else. The caseworker thought he knew why. For one thing, Brian was 6'2 and 175 pounds - an alarming size for a 16-year-old, even one who, like Brian, had never been violent. For another, he was a "services" kid, and therefore potential trouble. Previous school records were missing, an earlier TB test had turned up positive. The problems went on and on. Meanwhile, Brian found himself at loose ends. His interest in school began to wane. Five months passed while the enrollment process ground on. In April he was finally admitted. Before the end of the year, he would drop out; he didn't know whether he would ever go back.

LUK, which offers a dozen programs for children and families, is both a magnet for runaway youth and a state foster-care contractor, which means it sees teenagers on both ends of the homelessness spectrum. To staff, there is no meaningful distinction between typically homeless youth and the foster-care homeless. Merely at different places in the system, they have the same histories and the same problems. More important, their lives are characterized by the same instability. Many foster-care children, in fact, have moved around so many times that their educational histories are even more fragmented. Says Tom Hall, the agency's director of operations: "The state of Massachusetts had 14,000 kids in placement last year; I guarantee you 13,999 of them were in educational crisis." Unlike many professionals who work with children, though, Hall insists that only part of the problem can be blamed on schools. The larger part rests with the child welfare system itself and its reliance on temporary out-of-home placements for children in trouble.

Massachusetts, and LUK in particular, have made an attempt to address some of the issues arising from such short-term placements. One of the agency's state-contracted shelter programs is intended for children under 12 who are relatively new to the social services system. Called a "bridge program," its expressed goal is to help keep children connected to their home communities while social workers help reunite them with their families. Since school is an obvious anchor for most children, the agency makes a point of transporting kids back to their schools of origin, even though those schools are sometimes more than an hour away. It is an expensive and time-consuming

task; on some days, four staff members drive off in four different directions and log as many as 300 miles.

The program, though, is for children, not youth. At LUK - as at most other youth-serving agencies - teenagers are offered no such transportation to their home schools. For them, options are much more limited. There is local public school, alternative or vocational school, or, if they are living in the agency's 30-day shelter, a short-term transitional learning center. None of these choices, though, has proven particularly satisfactory.

Of the 547 children and youth the agency served between summer 1998 and 1999, it collected educational data on 135, all of them clients who lived on-site in long-term residential or crisis placements. Of those, 32 percent went to public school, 26 percent to the agency's shelter school program, 17 percent to an alternative education program and 4 percent to a GED program. Five percent were in no program at all. How many should have been in public school? All of them, Hall said. He says poor communication between social service agencies and schools, lack of flexibility, layers of complex bureaucracy and school behavior that occasionally borders on "abusive" all contribute to the problems surrounding enrollment and success for homeless and foster-care youth.

Those problems are heightened if the youth themselves are troubled, as a high percentage of LUK's clients are. Fourteen-year-old Eddie is a typical LUK teenager. Eddie has spent most of his life in foster care, and has moved around so often that he says he cannot even remember attending grade school. In the last few years, Eddie has gotten back on track academically. He finished eighth grade last year, attending a graduation ceremony and even going to the school dance. Unfortunately, things are not going as well as in other areas of his life. Eddie's new parents, who adopted him two years ago, are in the process of relinquishing him to the state due to his serious behavioral problems at home. Eddie will probably spend the next few years

Seventeen-year-old Marina's mother is a prostitute who lives in a car with her other children. Marina was a caretaker to them all, at least until, at 14, she became pregnant herself. By the time her son was born, she was, by her own estimate, "running around like crazy, just being disruptive." She was staying out late, experimenting with drugs, putting her baby in danger. Life got so chaotic that the state considered taking her child away. School was falling apart, too. Marina was a good student who typically got A's in her classes, but because of homelessness and truancy, she missed so many days that she lost an entire year's credits. By the time she ended up in LUK's pregnant and parenting teen program, she had to start over. She went to school all year, but toward the end discovered that she still hadn't earned enough credits to join her class in the fall. The news discouraged her so much that she began making up excuses not to go, and now is considering dropping out altogether.

in a long-term residential treatment program, where he will attend a special on-site school - not the best option, because he does so well in a regular school setting and can benefit from the mainstream environment there. Yet there seems to be no other choice.

Josie, a 17-year-old with a history of extreme abuse, both by her biological parents and then later by foster parents, has been hospitalized for borderline personality disorder and bi-polar disorder four times in the last year. She is, however, a bright and motivated student, and her most ardent wish is to find a way to finish school. Given her tangled academic history, though, she may never achieve her goal. Her most recent trouble with school began in 1998 when, while attending a vocational high school, she was hospitalized. Later she was notified by the school that she had missed so much class that she could not return to the program. She then enrolled in a regular high school; still in the hospital, she never set foot in the door, but instead put together a sort of correspondence course for herself whereby teachers sent her homework, which she then completed and returned. Later the school said she hadn't done enough

work to receive full credit. Meanwhile she had moved to a Department of Mental Health-funded residential program at LUK, where she tried to enroll in yet another school. But the school refused to take her on the grounds that she would be at the agency only a short time, and that she was still technically enrolled at her previous school. The problems went unresolved, and the school year eventually ended. Thus Josie faced a long summer of waiting, with no guarantee of school in the fall. "No one wants to take responsibility for me," she said. "I've been to eight or nine schools, and it's hard, because you lose your trust after a while. You go through so many, it's like a blur. I just want to graduate with my class." Her caseworker underscores the importance of school to Josie: "It's one of the things that keeps her alive," she said.

'Maybe there should be trainings that administrators or other school people can go to to see the stress levels and diagnoses, all of the things that these kids go through and labels that they have - to be more sensitive to the fact that these kids have been ripped around, thrown out, suspended, blown out of placements, and now they're just trying to find their niche, and no one in any part of their life is giving it to them. And the school is a big community, it's their peers, and if they don't fit in there, where are they going to fit?'
- Caseworker

In 1997, LUK hired Cynthia Levine to work as the agency's educational coordinator. Her role was to help the staff understand the complicated issues surrounding educational access and help them work more effectively with their local school systems. She says that many people at all levels of the system - agency staff, state social workers and school officials - genuinely misunderstand the regulations governing enrollment and access to school, and therefore create obstacles that shouldn't exist. Other times, schools intentionally drag out the process of enrollment in hope of waiting a student out, or purposely fail to give a child adequate structure at school so that his home placement will ultimately fail and he is moved out of district. Indeed, some schools view "system kids" as so inherently problematic that they will go to great lengths, subtle or otherwise, to keep them out. "I know when I was in working in a particular school district, anytime an agency, including DSS, hung up signs for foster care, the SPED (special education) director would run around and tear them down, so there's a mentality along those lines."

Caseworkers encounter the same bias all the time. Typically, it begins with enrollment. Said caseworker Kris Hammack: "We'll call and we'll say, 'We have a child that needs to be enrolled in school,' and it'll be, 'Oh, just come down and sign him in,' and then when I walk in from LUK and have the child from a placement, it becomes a whole new scene, you know. It's like, 'Well, is there anything we should know? How long are they going to be here? Are they going to blow out of here? We don't need the disruption.' I get this both with (foster care) kids and the kids at Horizon House (the agency's homeless teen shelter). I get the impression, and the kids get the impression, that it's just not worth it."

Rigorous new state testing and recent episodes of school violence are wild cards that will change the experience for homeless teens in school, and probably for the worse. There is already anecdotal evidence that some school systems have become less willing to accept youth who look potentially violent, even if they have never shown signs of aggression. Rick Cairns, another LUK caseworker, remembers trying to enroll a teenage client in a nearby school district. The girl, who had attempted suicide two years before, was dressed entirely in black. "She was sitting right there in the room and they just said 'Look, we think you're either going to kill yourself or kill everybody else, so we're rejecting you for enrollment.'" When the state Department of Education became involved, the school backed down, but by that time the girl was so angry that she refused to go.

The issue of new academic testing is more complicated. Up to now, the agency has had good luck getting teens to finish school by persuading them that the GED was even harder than sticking it out in class until graduation. But the new state test, the MCAS, is undeniably more difficult than the GED, and soon students will not be able to graduate without passing it. Thus their incentive to finish school will be significantly reduced. And with school districts competing over which can produce

the highest scores, educational advocates worry that homeless students, many of whom do poorly in school and so will presumably drag down cumulative results, will be even less welcome than ever.

Combined, the two issues are bad news for students who were always marginal to begin with. "I think a lot of kids will be unofficially directed to leave school," said Levine. "A lot of kids are going to be dropping out of school. A lot of kids are going to be suspended and ultimately expelled, and we're going to have this whole generation of kids who will be uneducated."

Levine said she tries to be diplomatic with recalcitrant schools but sometimes sees no recourse but to get tough. But efforts to push schools to accept students they do not want can backfire, Hall said. "We oftentimes will say, 'The (threatening) letter you're about to send is absolutely accurate, and if you send it, you'll never get another kid in that system.' " Not wanting to win a single battle to lose the greater war, the agency has therefore sometimes warned Levine to back off, even if she is right and the school is wrong.

Like many other youth-serving agencies, LUK has attempted to keep homeless youth academically involved through its short-term shelter-based school. But the "TLC," as it is known, has no affiliation with the local school system and isn't accredited by the state; therefore, school districts cannot officially recognize the work a student does there. There are even internal debates about who and what the program is really for. Is it, staff ask, about keeping teens busy or about educating them? Should it be a one-room schoolhouse or a learning resource center? Should it be run by teachers or by residential staff? So far, LUK has used residential staff, both because that's what it can afford, and because it hasn't yet settled on a philosophy of education that works for everyone. So far, however, no one is entirely satisfied with the program - not the youth themselves, who dismiss it as almost worthless academically, and not the shelter staff, who see it as an inadequate means of keeping kids plugged into the school system.

"We need 24-hour coverage; we want to keep kids educationally involved so they're not watching soap operas all day," Hall said. "But in the end, it's as much about keeping kids occupied so staff doesn't have to worry about them as it about the education we're giving them. We've moved toward education because it's where we need to be, but I don't think we're good at it. We're really not." Levine agrees that shelter-based programs, even good ones, are needlessly segregating, and "become a band-aid for the larger issue, which is that these kids aren't received in their schools. My focus is inclusion. How do you live in the real world if you're not in the real world?"

For now, LUK, like other agencies serving homeless youth, spends an inordinate amount of time trying to keep viable educational avenues open to their clients. Some end up going to a local technical high school or to GED programs. Some are placed in alternative schools from which they are then expelled for behavioral problems - a fact that angers caseworkers, who insist these programs specialize in just such students. A nearby Job Corps center offers academics and job training, but has a zero-tolerance policy for drugs that few LUK clients to date have managed to survive.

In the absence of the complete foster-care overhaul that Hall recommends, one thing is sure: these youth, who are invariably scarred by abandonment, abuse and other psychic wounds, will not become more attractive prospects for schools. If these students are to succeed, it is schools themselves that will have to improve. One step in the right direction, Hall said, would be the creation of a state homeless education fund that would guarantee payment for students placed in a school from out of district; such a fund would almost certainly reduce squabbling between schools over who is ultimately responsible for any particular student. A new state policy mandating that all

'I think a lot of kids will be unofficially directed to leave school. A lot of kids are going to be dropping out of school. A lot of kids are going to be suspended and ultimately expelled, and we're going to have this whole generation of kids who will be uneducated.'
- Educational Specialist

shelter clients, not just those under 12, be transferred to their schools of origin would also be helpful, though expensive and logistically difficult to carry out.

Whether or not more fundamental changes are made, caseworker Kris Hammack suggests that school officials educate themselves about the ways that trauma affects kids. "Maybe there should be trainings that administrators or other school people can go to to see the stress levels and diagnoses, all of the things that these kids go through and labels that they have - to be more sensitive to the fact that these kids have been ripped around, thrown out, suspended, blown out of placements, and now they're just trying to find their niche, and no one in any part of their life is giving it to them. And the school is a big community, it's their peers, and if they don't fit in there, where are they going to fit?"

These youth, who are invariably scarred by abandonment, abuse and other psychic wounds, will not become more attractive prospects for schools. If these students are to succeed, it is schools themselves that will have to improve.

BRAXTON, MAINE: 'WE'RE A DIFFERENT KIND OF SMART'

(The agency profiled below wished to remain anonymous, fearing that any claims it might make against nearby school districts would have negative ramifications for its homeless teen clients. Therefore, the name of the agency and its staff members have been changed, along with a few identifying details of the city itself.)

Braxton, a depressed industrial city of 61,000 in central Maine, is typical of the untrendy cities in the state's interior - old, a bit grimy, notable only for the sea of pine trees that surrounds it and the faded businesses that line its downtown streets. Braxton's youth shelter, however, is genuinely unusual. Indeed, among agencies serving poor and homeless youth, it is quickly becoming an anachronism. At a time when such agencies increasingly accept only teens who are already involved in state systems, and thus whose care will be funded, Hale House takes any teenager who walks through the door in need of help, whether anyone will pay or not.

Many homeless or at-risk teens are served by the agency through its street-outreach program. Others stay for 30 days in the agency's shelter, and may, if eligible, move into the agency's transitional living program. They can stay there up to a year or more, but as residents in the program, they must either work or go to school. Unfortunately, school has become an underutilized option.

Why? The answer is both simple and complicated. One, there are few real options. There is the local high school and then there is an evening GED program, and a high percentage of Hale House kids can't make it in either. (Actually, a third option, a local educational and job training program, also exists, but it is located so far away that few teenagers can get there.) The reasons the teens don't do well in the available programs are clear enough. Many of the kids have learning problems; they simply can't sit still for a three-hour GED class or navigate a crowded, distracting high school scene. Others, like Nina, have difficulty accepting the traditional structure of classrooms. Still others simply don't want to be there. They are older or more sophisticated than their peers, and they resent being made to spend time with kids who "just don't get it."

Tasha, an emancipated minor who was homeless before

Dirk, an articulate 18-year-old in a baseball cap and sneakers, is what shelter workers call a "couch surfer" - he lives with one friend and then another, staying wherever he can. An ex-foster child, he was emancipated at 16, and since then has wandered around, dealing drugs to survive and getting into skirmishes with the law. In the focus group, he holds the hand of a thin teenage girl sitting beside him and speaks in a rapid, deadpan tone. "I got kicked out of my house when I was 11, and I've been on my own since then. I got stuck at DHS, and I believe I've been through about 13 different schools, so I didn't have enough time to get all the credits. I did all the work - I did work on my own at home, you know, when I wasn't in school. But there's no way you can get enough credits; there's no way you can stay in one place. I was going from foster home to foster home. For the first year and a half that I was in DHS custody I was going from shelter to shelter - one month in each place. You lose a lot of stuff; you lose a lot of time." Dirk ended up quitting school, but later earned both a GED and a high school diploma. He wanted, he says, to "be covered." Despite his efforts, though, he still doesn't have a job. On his own now, he has applied to Hale House's transitional living program for homeless teens. Beyond that, though, the future doesn't look particularly bright.

eventually moving into her own apartment, hated going to school with students who led the kind of middle-class, sheltered life she never had. "We're a different kind of smart," she said, glancing around the group of teenagers camped out on the floor and on sofas in an upstairs room of the agency's outreach center. "There's street-smart, and there's commonsense smart, and a lot of people in school, they just don't have it. They may get it when they're older, but you can tell by listening to them flap their gums that they don't have it now. And it just burns me I had to be with them." It also made her angry that school officials didn't trust her enough to let her call herself in sick, even though the state considered her an adult. Like many homeless youth, she says her school was unwilling to recognize her problems as fundamentally more serious than the problems of most high school kids. "They want to know why I'm late to school and I'm like, 'Okay, the toilet in my apartment was overflowing, alright?' And they just look at you."

Yet another reason for the failure of homeless youth to succeed in available programs is what staff see as the uncomprehending, inflexible and sometimes even hostile attitude of local school districts to their clients. They cite a nearby school district that informed an outreach client who was having problems at home that if she left home to stay with friends out of the district, she would be unable to return to school, despite the fact that graduation was only a few months away. They note another school official's suggestion that they "throw cold water" on youth from the shelter who have difficulty making it to school on time - a problem staff say is often due to the medication many of their clients take for depression and other disorders.

Such attitudes are all too typical of school personnel, said Doug Wicks, director of the agency's transitional living program. "Schools look at (homeless teens') behavior as though it's their fault.... They think we're asking them to feel sorry for these kids, and we're not. I'm asking them to respect them and their situation, not judge them. And it's a judgment that goes on."

What might be a better option for the youth of Hale House? The solution, actually, is nearby. It is called the Roosevelt School, and, according to Wicks, who is also a certified special education teacher, it would be an excellent choice for many of his clients. It offers alternative education for students who don't fit the mainstream mold, and is so popular locally that there is a waiting list to get in. Unfortunately, the school lies just across district lines, and thus is off limits to the agency's teenagers.

In practice, what limited educational options means in Braxton is that most homeless youth in the city simply drop out. Of the 46 homeless teenagers who lived in Hale House's transitional living program in the 1998-99 school year, 32 needed help with educational placement. Of those, half encountered some obstacle - lack of school records, missing credits or unacceptable shelter school credits - that delayed their enrollment in school by at least two weeks, and often much longer. These sorts of delays are "like sabotage" to homeless

Michelle, a teary 18-year-old with bleached yellow hair, rarely speaks, and when she does her voice is full of self-loathing. She left home at 15 because of serious problems with her mother and her mother's boyfriend, and in no time was doing the "shelter shuffle," moving from one program to another and missing weeks of school at a time. At 17, when she was in the 10th grade, she finally quit. "Everything felt too heavy. Too heavy," she says. "I had so many thoughts going through my head about being homeless and everything ... I didn't have time to think about a mathematical problem. My teachers were drilling me on top of that, so I had to go. I had to." Now she lives at Hale House, sleeps a lot, and can't seem to decide on her next move. She isn't working and can't bring herself to go back to school - but unless she starts doing one or the other, she won't be able to stay at the agency for long. School, for the moment, is out. "She's so alternative, the school would have to be alternative - but there are no options here," a Hale House staffer says.

students, Wicks said, because they increase the chance that students will fall permanently behind and end up quitting. Indeed, of all TLP clients who did enroll in school, or who already were enrolled when they entered the program, nearly 90 percent ultimately did drop out before graduating.

Only three of the students who dropped out got GEDs instead. GEDs are a subject of controversy among professionals who work with troubled youth. Some say that, depending on the particular program, they can be a reasonably good option for youth who can or will not go to regular school; others say they signal a failure of the education system to make room for every young person, troubled or not. Keri Lambert, head of the agency's outreach program, thinks GEDs give teens false hope and mainstream educators a way out. "They throw them in GED programs and tell them it's just as good as a diploma. There's no way it's as good. It's like throwing these kids to the wolves. They go into the workforce and they don't have any skills, they don't have any education."

According to Lambert, the agency provides case management outreach services to 80 to 100 struggling teens per year. About 25 percent of the teens have graduated from school already, but of the remaining 75 percent, over half have dropped out of school, been expelled, or been suspended and never gone back. Sometimes the agency can hook such teens up with GED or vocational programs, but often it cannot. Of this group, youth who cannot qualify for state aid end up working minimum-wage jobs. Rents in Braxton are so low that they can sometimes scrape by, but Braxton, Lambert notes, is an anomaly. Minimum-wage earners in many other cities in Maine cannot make it on their own. Therefore, unless something unexpected happens to lift Braxton's dropouts out of the trap they find themselves in, most can count on becoming lifelong members of the city's population of working poor.

Frustrated by the lack of alternative programs available to its youth, the agency has decided to investigate the possibility of setting up its own long-term alternative education program on site. Unlike Hale House's current school, which offers short-term individualized education but grants no academic credits, the new program would culminate in a regular diploma. Wicks, who has organized and run other alternative education schools in Maine, says he knows the program can work. It would offer flexibility, one-on-one tutoring, constant exposure to community life - all the things he is convinced disadvantaged youth need to learn and feel integrated into broader society. The irony is that if an amendment to McKinney proposed by the President and by homeless advocates goes through, this type of school would be banned because it segregates homeless youth from mainstream classes, denying them the same basic educational and extracurricular opportunities that other teens have.

Nina, 18, is a pale, petite girl dressed in black. Her ears, nose and fingers are studded with rings and her black hair is teased into a new-wave frizz. She is an alternative kid in a non-alternative town, and she knows how very different she is. A lesbian, she left for California when she was only 16. Though she was seeking greater acceptance, what she found was life on the streets. After a few months she hitched her way back to Maine. She found an apartment with a bunch of other kids, but recognizes now that none of them knew what they were doing. Life there was chaos. She worked nights, and often couldn't rouse herself in the morning to go to school. "I wanted to stay in school," she says now, looking back. "I wanted to get my diploma, even go to college. But things change when life becomes more real. When you're living on your own, you work the third shift, you got to get up at six in the morning and walk to school? It's like, it's way too much of an inconvenience to worry about, so you end up not going." When she did go, she found that she was so far behind that she was chalking up F's instead of her usual A's. "Nobody ever asked me why," she says. She ended up dropping out and going for a GED instead.

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DERRY, NEW HAMPSHIRE: A MCKINNEY SITE

Derry is a small, predominately white town of 32,000 in southern New Hampshire, not old and rustic in the traditional New England sense but aggressively new, with a fast-food strip and housing developments stretching out beyond its border. Its poverty rate is low, its high school seniors are college-bound, and it sits just within commuting distance of the booming Boston economy. Derry hardly fits the profile of a community with a homeless problem.

Yet there is a problem. True to its conservative image, New Hampshire has an underfunded, underdeveloped social services system that spends less money per capita on needy citizens than most other states, even though the number of homeless people, lured to the state by promises of high employment, has grown in recent years. Poor youth in particular often have a difficult time in New Hampshire. Relatively few services are targeted to them, and fewer than 15 shelter beds are available for them throughout the state. The emergency youth services vacuum is a consequence of a state policy that defines youth living on their own not as "homeless" but as victims of abuse or neglect - in other words, as automatic state cases. In practical terms, the law means private agencies cannot work with homeless children under 18 without referring them to the state first. But since many homeless young people don't want to become involved in the state system, the bottom line is that they often simply go unidentified and unserved by any helping agency.

Though undeniably small, Derry nevertheless has the fourth largest population, and third largest school population, in New Hampshire. Given the changing demographics of the state and the perception that an increasing number of teenagers were living on their own, in 1995 Derry's school superintendent decided to apply for McKinney funds. As a "minimum-grant" state, New Hampshire receives only $100,000 a year from the government to fund programming for homeless students, $50,000 of which is available for distribution to school districts; in 1996, Derry was one of the two school districts to win a slice of the money. For $21,000, the school district contracted with The Upper Room, a local agency that runs educational programs for all ages, to create and manage a McKinney project.

The agency began by taking an unusual step for a McKinney subgrantee: it attempted to figure out how many youth in the district were actually homeless. It was a particularly interesting question, especially in light of recent state statistics on homelessness. In a one-day survey of schools the N.H. Department of Education had conducted that year to estimate

Robbie was 17 when he decided to drop out of school and get a job. His father agreed to let him go on living at home for $80 a week. But when Robbie decided to re-enroll in school and couldn't keep up the payments anymore, his father kicked him out. In October he pulled into the driveway of The Upper Room, a local social services agency, in the beat-up car where he had been living for two months. Though he was enrolled in school full-time, he didn't have an alarm clock to help him get up in the morning, and he often was late. He had a small income from his part-time job, but he could hardly feed himself. If he was going to continue in school, he clearly needed the basics: housing, food, clothes and regular access to a shower. The agency helped him find a cheap apartment, bought him shampoo, toothpaste, school supplies and other necessities, helped him sign up for free breakfast and lunch at school, and directed him to the local soup kitchen. It negotiated with the school to reduce his class schedule so that he could continue to work, and provided him with tutoring, a particularly urgent need because Robbie had been diagnosed with learning disabilities and was considered academically limited.

the number of such youth throughout the state, Pinkerton Academy, the local high school in Derry, said it had perhaps one student who could be considered homeless. But in The Upper Room's survey of Pinkerton's 2,700 students, the number of homeless youth in the district was reported to be closer to 200. About half these homeless youth were not attending school. Most lived with friends, but 12 lived in cars and one lived under a bridge. Almost half were reported to have been homeless for more than three months. The agency began an aggressive campaign to lure in this hidden population, hanging up fliers all over town, making presentations before local clubs, creating a special "homelessness prevention day" at the school and otherwise maintaining a high local profile.

The youth who eventually began contacting the agency were among the truly homeless; their parents or relatives had kicked them out or they had run away from hostile home environments. Aside from friends, they had no one to turn to for help. Some of the teenagers were dirty; others were hungry; some suffered from chronic untreated health problems. Their needs were urgent and obvious. Thus, rather than focus on more typical McKinney programming - say, afterschool tutoring - the agency decided to adopt a comprehensive case-management approach aimed at addressing these teens' basic life needs first.

The program's director, Kimberly Gerrish, began spending hours in line to get her clients food stamps and Medicaid - things they couldn't get for themselves without missing school. She helped arrange housing for them with friends, or, with the aid of a first-month rental assistance program in town, helped them find apartments of their own. Sometimes she teamed up homeless youth as roommates. If they needed it, she bought her clients school supplies and household necessities - anything they had to have but couldn't get on their own.

Once the teens were stable, Gerrish began working with

As a baby, Jasmine lived with her mother in California; by the time she was a toddler, though, state social workers had discovered she was being abused and removed her. After a stint in foster care, she went to live with her father. Eventually she was taken from him as well. She was finally placed 3,000 miles away, with an aunt in New Hampshire. Though Jasmine put down roots in her new community, her aunt simply bided her time until Jasmine turned 18 and then kicked her out of the house. Jasmine is a highly motivated student - when her father refused to enroll her in school in California, she took him to court - but now that she was homeless, she felt forced to drop out. She moved in temporarily with a friend and took a full-time job bussing tables at a restaurant. The job didn't pay much, but it offered her her only opportunity to eat. Eventually she approached The Upper Room for help. The agency found her more permanent lodgings with a co-worker who lived in her own school district. It also got her on the free-meal plan at her high school. The school, in fact, had been helpful to Jasmine before. When she had moved in with her aunt, she had already missed two years of school, but she worked so hard that she earned enough credits to skip her junior year. She hadn't had a birth certificate, but the school had enrolled her anyway. Now, with counseling and stable housing, she was able to rejoin her class. She will graduate in June 2000.

the school in earnest. She outlined her usual procedure. "One of the first people I talk to is the guidance counselor to find out how they're doing in school; how's their attendance, how's their grades," she said. "Almost all of them, their grades have fallen or they're flunking. And then we have to look at whether this is something they can recover from. Have they been missing school for three weeks, or three months? I've had kids who've just become homeless, and they miss a lot of school and a lot of homework. And sometimes teachers will say, 'Well, I gave them the chance to make it up and they didn't. I've done my job.' But they don't realize all the extenuating circumstances. So we'll sit down at a team meeting with all the teachers and I'll say, 'This is what's going on: the student wants to say in school, but he needs some additional help making up homework and making up attendance days. We're having this meeting because everyone's agreed to work a little bit extra. Maybe he can have some extra homework, and I can work with him on an individual

basis.' "

And the system almost always worked. Because the superintendent had already established a tone friendly to homeless students, teachers and truancy officers were willing to make the effort to keep them in school. Prior absences could be forgiven, missed homework could be made up. If students kept their end of the bargain, they could recover their equilibrium and get back on track.

Many of the program's clients did just that. Of the 47 youth served by the program in the 1998-99 school year, 57 percent attended public high school; 13 percent went to GED programs; and 2 percent went to alternative out-of-district placements. Twelve percent had previously dropped out of school and could not be persuaded to go back. Perhaps most relevant, though, is that all the teens who were in school when they came to the agency ended up completing their school year, and all the teens due to graduate or get GED diplomas did so. In other words, the program was 100 percent successful in keeping homeless teens in school.

The program seemed so successful that the agency had even contracted with the superintendents' of surrounding school districts to run similar programs in those schools - a fact the agency was so proud of that it framed and hung the superintendent's signatures on the wall.

The irony is that in June 1999, the program learned that Derry's request for another year of McKinney funding had been denied. New Hampshire McKinney coordinator Lynda Thistle Elliott, the official in charge of administering the grants, is circumspect about why, saying only that the grants have become more competitive in recent years and that case management may ultimately not be "the best model" for dealing with the educational problems of homeless youth. But a deeper issue exists. Because the program was required to refer all homeless youth under 18 to the state system, it ended up working primarily with teens 18 and over - a problem, because McKinney money is targeted to school-age kids, not to older teenagers, even if they haven't yet graduated. Therefore there is a serious question about whether older youth can benefit from McKinney funds in New Hampshire, or - given states'general tendency to fund programming for children but not teens - indeed anywhere.

"I've had kids who've just become homeless, and they miss a lot of school and a lot of homework. And sometimes teachers will say, 'Well, I gave them the chance to make it up and they didn't. I've done my job.' But they don't realize all the extenuating circumstances. So we'll sit down at a team meeting with all the teachers and I say, 'This is what's going on: the student wants to say in school, but he needs some additional help making up homework and making up attendance days. We're having this meeting because everyone's agreed to work a little bit extra. Maybe he can have some extra homework, and I can work with him on an individual basis.' "
- 'Project Lookout' Program Director

WATERBURY, CONNECTICUT: 'IT WAS THE END OF MY WORLD'

In all of Waterbury, a city of 105,000 two hours In all of Waterbury, Conn., a city of 102,000 two hours north of New York City, there is not a single shelter that accepts truly homeless youth - that is, youth unattached to the state Department of Child and Family Services. When staff at Waterbury Youth Services, the city's largest youth-serving agency, get a call from a teenager unconnected to the state system - and they get about five a week - they tell the youth they can't help him. Sometimes the agency calls DCF on the youth's behalf, hoping that it will take on the case and eventually refer the teen back to the agency for help. But usually the agency is told that the youth - who is typically 16 or 17 - is too old for the state to become involved with now. What happens to the young homeless people who call looking for assistance? No one knows for sure; there is no way to count them or to even know where they are.

The state-connected youth in the agency's independent living program are thus, in a sense, the lucky ones. In terms of schooling, though, an odd intersection of state regulations and school recalcitrance makes their problems look as complicated as those of other, objectively worse-off students who live in a town like Derry.

About 25 clients aged 16 to 21 live in the agency's apartment program every year. Almost all have spent many years in the foster care system and, at 16 or 17, were deemed more or less ready to make the transition into adulthood. To get into the program, the youth have to be reasonably mature and ready to live on their own. They also have to go to school. Therefore - because youth come to the agency from all over the state - the first thing the agency has to do is get them enrolled locally. Invariably, that's when the trouble begins.

As in many other districts, options are limited. The district's only charter school specializes in students with behavioral problems, but since its opening in 1997 it has become notorious for its chaotic classroom environment and high dropout rate. Waterbury staff, who consider structure to be crucial for their clients, have thus never considered sending a youth there. There are city-funded alternative programs for younger children who need a year-long break from mainstream school, but Waterbury independent living clients aren't eligible for them. There is also at least one alternative high school program, but

Georgette entered the foster care system at age 10, after state social workers took her away from her abusive parents. From the start, her behavior was a problem: she wouldn't follow rules, she was arrested for shoplifting, she was argumentative. School wasn't going well, either; she often skipped class and ended up repeating the ninth grade. When she was placed in a group home, she began running away. Eventually she found herself in a homeless shelter. Georgette, who has a history of depression, recalls the shelter's education program. "I was like a sophomore, and I was doing ninth and eighth grade work; it was busy work. There's wasn't no teachers. They'd just give us a pamphlet of assignments and when we finished they would be 'Great,' and that was it. I had to practically beg them to let me to go to school. There, they didn't have your records; they didn't want you to be going to school. There's not enough people working there to be taking you to register and do all this stuff. So I have to sit down and write a letter to my social worker telling her I want to go to public school. I remember at one point they told me I would have to prove myself worthy of going to public school. They said, 'You go down to the basement school, you do good in the basement, we'll send you to public school.' So I was down in the basement a couple of weeks, and finally they registered me, and that's how I ended up going to school." When she was accepted into an independent living program, she had to switch to a new school. Unfortunately, she hadn't been at her old school long enough to receive credit for her work, so she was told she would have to start her sophomore year all over again. Furthermore, the school year was already nearly over, meaning that she would have to wait until fall. School officials recommended she try adult ed. instead.

staff say it is also inappropriate for their clients.

And there are, of course, the three local high schools in the city, which by law have to take any student living in their district. Many of Waterbury's clients have attended one or more of these schools, and almost all would prefer to go back to public school to graduate. But because those schools require records from youths' previous school, and previous school records often can't be retrieved - at least in time to satisfy the state's requirement that youth be enrolled in school quickly - clients generally can't go there, either.

Missing records are only one obstacle to enrollment, however. Teens who have missed long periods of school inevitably have tallied up fewer-than-normal academic credits and thus are too old for the classes they are qualified to go into. Sometimes schools will reject a student for enrollment on that basis alone. Sheila Garlington, director of Waterbury's independent living program, outlines a common scenario. "We have clients coming to us, and we say, 'Well, what grade are you in?' and they say, 'I'm a junior in high school.' Well, then you try to register them for school, and their transcript says, 'No, you're a freshman.' How discouraging is that? Because for the most part, they won't lie about it. They may have attended school as a junior somewhere, but the problem is getting a transcript that proves it."

Indeed, the credit gap is one of the biggest reasons teens decide to drop out of school altogether. "I tried so hard to get my credits," said Georgette, the 17-year-old who lived for three months in a homeless shelter. "I went so far as to call the schools myself to get my credits, but when I went to (the local high school) without my credits, I felt like that was the end of my world. I felt like I'm not going to graduate; I don't want to go back to school."

These bureaucratic tangles mean that even though public school is "definitely" the best place for the agency's independent living clients, only about 15 percent of them actually end up there, Garlington said. For the rest, only one option remains: adult education. But adult education is problematic for teenagers for a variety of reasons. One, it is less structured than regular school, giving too much flexibility to students who already struggle with self-discipline; and two, it keeps them firmly outside of the adolescent mainstream. Indeed, many of the teens' classmates in adult education programs are older ex-prison inmates living in halfway houses - not, staff believe, a particularly healthy peer group for youth already at risk for drug use and delinquency. Finally, adult education is academically undemanding. "Kids who don't come in with skills generally don't leave with them either," said Garlington. And, with just a few exceptions, that describes just about all her clients.

Most independent living clients, in fact, have emotional problems related to their histories of abuse and abandonment that have always made school difficult. "Once they come to us, we have our work cut out for us," said Garlington. "They have to be in school full-time, and if they've only had negative experiences in school, then you're almost setting them up, and that's what we find." In fact, 90 percent of the youth who wash out of the program do so because, despite program monitoring and support, they cannot fulfill the school requirement.

On a hot day in Waterbury, eight young people, all of them veterans of the foster care system, sit around a table talking about the problem of trying to put together an education on the fly. The constant disruption, they all say, wreaks havoc in lives that are already too complicated.

For several girls in the program, pregnancy and motherhood made life in public school almost impossible. Said Cynthia, an 18-year-old holding a wriggling little boy, "I got home from my job at around midnight and was up again at four in the morning trying to do some of my homework so I wouldn't have detention

'When I left Kennedy (High School, in Waterbury), I was just starting to do pre-algebra, and after that, I never did pre-algebra again. Then when I went to New Haven, instead of pre-algebra, they put me right in pre-calculus. I just barely passed pre-calculus. Then when I left New Haven and they put me in Hartford, they put me back down to basic math. Everything was getting switched around, so I never really learned. I just managed to study a little bit of material and just barely pass all my tests.'
- Veronica, 17

again. I'd get about a half hour in before I would have to get my son ready for day-care and hop the 5:15 (a.m.) bus to his sitter's house so I could transfer twice more after that to get to school by 7:15. I was usually late because, you know, buses don't always run on time - and I'd rack up another detention. I tried to tell them my situation but they didn't care, they didn't understand. I asked my guidance counselor about why didn't they have a day care program in the school, and she just said, 'That's why babies shouldn't be having babies.' " Cynthia dropped out.

Other teenagers complain about the patched-together quality of the education they end up getting. "When I left Kennedy (High School, in Waterbury), I was just starting to do pre-algebra, and after that, I never did pre-algebra again," said Veronica, a 17-year-old who talks so quickly her words flow together in one long, musical stream. "Then when I went to New Haven, instead of pre-algebra, they put me right in pre-calculus. I just barely passed pre-calculus. Then when I left New Haven and they put me in Hartford, they put me back down to basic math. Everything was getting switched around, so I never really learned. I just managed to study a little bit of material and just barely pass all my tests." Now, about adult ed, she says, "It's not preparing me for college, because my friends are in college, and I see things I should have learned that I never even experienced because of having to go here."

Another girl agrees that adult education is a poor substitute for regular school. "I think they're trying to say you lack intelligence when they give you that little baby work. They give you like seventh-, eighth-grade math. I already did it, you know what I'm saying?"

Not all the youth feel that way. Some say that adult education has allowed them the flexibility they need to take care of their babies and deal with transportation problems; they say that they can talk to teachers there and get the emotional and

Jonelle liked her school and felt well-treated by her teachers and counselors. Even so, she still wasn't able to finish. "The whole beginning of my junior year, I was just missing days, just being late; my daughter's day care didn't open til 8:30 (a.m.), classes started at 7, and either I was coming in late or I just wasn't coming in..... All my teachers, they bent over backwards to help me. I was bringing in over a 90 average. I had APO (advanced placement) classes, I had honors classes, so they helped me even though they weren't supposed to. Even though I wasn't there, I was making up the work and stuff - but during the last marking period, it was like, they tried, but they couldn't do anything else. My situation wasn't getting any better. It's not like they gave up on me; they did as much as they could, but I ended up losing a whole year." Jonelle, too, found she had no option but to go to adult ed.

academic support they need. But whether the Waterbury teenagers went to an alternative program or not, one thing seems clear: none of them were looking for an academic handout. All the teens said that teachers who respect students and hold them to high standards create the best learning environment - one that, given the comments many teens made, helps even the most difficult youth to take responsibility for his own behavior. "I made them not like me," 16-year-old Bradley said, recalling his arrival at his new public school. "Because when I first got there, I got on everybody's nerves real bad. Throwing things at the teacher, getting written up.... I was a punk." Now that he has accepted his own role in creating his problems, school is working better for him.

Bradley's difficulties aren't yet over, though. Since he's been in the program, he has been caught dabbling with drugs, and if he can't or won't stop, he'll be kicked out - a move that could easily prove disastrous for him, because he has no where else to go. As a truly homeless youth, his situation would be far worse than it is now. Waterbury is not one of 16 McKinney-funded school districts in the state, and thus doesn't have special programming that would help keep him in school. On his own, it is easy to imagine him dropping out and, like the other homeless young people in Waterbury, simply disappearing.

THE NEW ENGLAND MCKINNEY COORDINATORS

Title VII-B of the McKinney Act establishes the office of state McKinney coordinator to administer the state grant program; educate schools about their obligations under McKinney; collect data about the scope and problems of homeless children and youth; and coordinate with social services agencies to improve the provision of comprehensive services to homeless students. As the lone state official charged with implementing the overall mandates of McKinney, the coordinators are expected to work on behalf of all homeless students in the state, not only those who attend McKinney-funded sites, which bear a heavier legal responsibility than other school districts to assist homeless students. Most states keep a portion of their overall grant for administrative, technical assistance and direct service costs - in 1997-98, states kept an average of 16 percent - and then divide the rest among school districts that apply for them (NCH, 1999).

'McKinney would be more effective and easier if the language were less vague and very clear, and if it would give us some really good guidelines, because it gets difficult to ask for removal of barriers and changes in legislation in the state if there is no reason to do it.'
- EHCY Coordinator, New Hampshire

We interviewed the McKinney EHCY coordinators of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Connecticut about the adequacy of educational services for homeless youth in their states. Predictably, their answers were mixed, though a consensus emerged about the inherent difficulty of identifying and serving teenagers, and of encouraging uniform treatment of homeless youth when school districts have such wide latitude in setting their own policies. While able to respond to problems brought to them by individual homeless students and their parents, the coordinators reported that due to lack of time and funds, they were unable to do much outreach or education about McKinney, or to attend to the complex systemic problems that can render the law so ineffective. (For the states' McKinney-related activities, see Appendix A.)

In New Hampshire, Lynda Thistle Elliott sends an information packet to schools once a year and settles problems brought to her attention, but, like other coordinators, feels forced by circumstances into a reactive rather than proactive role. Although Thistle Elliott is considered by national homeless advocates to be a particularly energetic coordinator, she says it is unrealistic to expect state coordinators, who generally have other duties as well, to make McKinney work. They have no ability to enforce McKinney, she said, and some provisions are so vague that they are open to interpretation. For instance, the school-of-origin rule in McKinney is generally taken by superintendents to mean that if the parent of a child wants the child to remain in a former school, the superintendents of the new and old districts are allowed to decide if the child will indeed be allowed to stay. And what if, as in the case of most homeless youth, no parents are involved? "My suspicion is the kids drop out; they disappear. I'm not sure it's ever been tested by a youth in this situation," she said.

The majority of schools in New Hampshire do not have homeless liaisons, she said, and if a school makes an effort to accommodate a homeless youth, it does it because it wants to, not because it has to. Indeed, policies on residency requirements and other issues vary from district to district. One district allows homeless children and youth to stay in school for 30 days after moving outside the district; others do not. "We have little pieces of self-rule," she said, echoing officials and shelter workers in other states.

Thistle Elliott said her job would be simpler if McKinney itself were simpler. "McKinney would be more effective and easier if the language were less vague and very clear, and if it would give us some really good guidelines, because it gets difficult to ask for removal of barriers and changes in legislation (in the state) if there is no (legal) reason to do it." Specifically, she said, language regarding school of origin, residency issues

and waiving of fees need to be clarified. "More important, I'd like to see funding that would adequately support the state being able to carry that out - we could get some pilot projects for homeless youth where we could start addressing those needs we haven't addressed so far."

In Massachusetts, Susan Farb devotes 60 percent of her time to work on McKinney, but she spends most of it dealing with the problems of homeless children, not youth. "My own personal focus is on the younger kids. When I hear something and they're younger, I go at it one, two, three. If it's youth in transitional homes or runaways, I have to be honest and tell you I probably hear less about it."

Like Thistle Elliott, Farb believes McKinney could be made to work better for teenagers, but the problem is identifying the teens in the first place. "(The program) probably could be stronger by outreach from this office. The question is, I'm not sure which way to outreach, in respect to ... what' s needed or what's not needed, where the youth in transitional homes are across the state."

In Maine, Frank Antonucci spends approximately 40 percent of his time administering the educational provisions of the McKinney Act. Though he notifies school superintendents yearly about the law, and went to great lengths to inform schools about it when it was first passed, he acknowledges that it may be time to reemphasize the issue.

But it is McKinney-funded programs, and not the more general mandates of the law, that Antonucci believes can most impact the problem of homelessness. And in Maine, the grant money is exactly the problem - not, as is typically the case, because there is too little money, but because school districts refuse to apply for the funds that are there. Although all school superintendents receive a grant application every year, no more than four schools have ever applied in any given year, Antonucci said. For the 1999-2000 school year, only one district applied and was granted monies. "It is clear that there is a need to service the educational needs of the youth who are homeless, but we are limited in our capacity to compel schools to apply for the grants available."

Though coordinating McKinney is primarily "a desk job," Antonucci said he has offered schools site visits to encourage their participation in the grant application process; however, he is not hopeful that schools will become more enthusiastic any time soon. "There is a hesitancy (in schools) to take in strangers ... and some counties are just in denial of the problem altogether."

(The small sum of money available combined with the extra legal burden that falls to schools receiving it may also explain why schools, in Maine and elsewhere, decide against applying.)

Using McKinney funds, Antonucci said Maine has employed two field researchers to tackle the most difficult obstacle to helping homeless youth - identifying them. In the meantime, he said the federal government needs to liberalize its rules on how McKinney funds can be spent. "The federal government needs to be less restrictive on how money is used as long as the state can prove program effectiveness. The bottom line is, if we put the money into early identification of kids and families with needs, we would not need the McKinney Act."

Judith Halpern, Connecticut's state coordinator, insisted that only 10 percent of her job is related to McKinney and that she "just does the paperwork." The small bit of time she gives her state coordinator duties is undoubtedly a function of a decision she said the state has made to keep none of its federal McKinney money for administrative or technical assistance costs, but instead to give every penny to applicant school districts. But even so, the grants are small. Only $16,500 goes to each McKinney site in her state - hardly enough, she said, to fund comprehensive programming even in those districts. To make matters worse, she said the state of Connecticut will see a reduction in its grant for the 2000-2001 school year.

'The federal government needs to be less restrictive on how money is used as long as the state can prove program effectiveness. The bottom line is, if we put the money into early identification of kids and families with needs, we would not need the McKinney Act.'
- EHCY Coordinator, Maine

THE SCHOOLS

'Transient students are very disruptive to the school environment, and foster resentment among some of the staff who feel like we are always picking up other people's problems.'
- School Guidance Counselor

In the matter of McKinney and other legislation meant to improve the status of poor children, schools find themselves in an unenviable position. On one hand they are under increasing pressure to improve their academic outcomes for all students, and on the other they face a complex array of social and political problems that they must somehow address before substantial overall gains can be made. Homeless youth, both those in and out of state care, are often troubled, and they can be difficult and expensive to educate. Many have problems conforming to the authoritarian structure of ordinary schools; many are truant, disruptive, or, because of previous schooling gaps, lag behind the rest of their classes. Few have the typical kinds of support - transportation to school and extracurricular events, money for school supplies, field trips and other extras, help with homework - that ordinary teenagers take for granted. For these reasons and others, many homeless youth make undesirable students. Nonetheless, in all but the most extreme cases, schools are required to serve them. Not surprisingly, some do a good job and others do not. Some reach out to homeless youth, forge friendly collaborations with local social service agencies and create welcoming environments that not only address students' deficits but honor their powerful life experiences. Others remain like hostile fortresses, doing everything possible to bar their doors to students they suspect will bring trouble along with them. [For a description of model practices in schools receiving McKinney funds, see Hightower, et al, in bibliography.]

Our attempts to contact public schools in the four cities we studied was only partially successful. Four of the seven schools failed to respond to verbal and written requests for information regarding the education of their homeless students. Of the remaining officials who agreed to interviews, all said they had heard of the McKinney Act but none knew exactly what it required of public schools.

On the whole, the three school officials we interviewed noted lack of transportation, the absence of a responsible adult, and delays in receiving educational records as obstacles to enrollment of homeless students. None, however, believed homelessness was a large or serious problem at their school, and they could offer few details about how their schools dealt with the issue when it did arise.

The registrar at a large high school said her school "does everything it can to help at-risk youth," including offering specialized programs and providing a liaison to help transition and support homeless teenagers. She was unsure, however, how such students are identified or referred to the programs. This was true despite the fact that the school has a relationship with a local agency to help just such teens.

An alternative school in another state services 90 students in grades 10 through 12. The school is so small that students facing housing crises are easily identified and helped, said a school employee. "The school is a large family," said the official, "and we have no social workers, psychologists, or guidance counselors.... Every teacher and staff member works together to help the students in need." It is, perhaps, the school's student-centered approach that makes it a popular choice for local students, and that explains its long waiting list. Yet it is the difficulty of finding a slot that may make it a questionable option for homeless students, most of whom cannot stay in one place indefinitely while they wait to be accepted.

A guidance counselor at a large urban school system in yet another city describes an entirely different educational milieu. That school's population is highly transient, with nearly one-

third of its students moving away or dropping out before graduation. The problem of transience, which is doubtless exacerbated by the city's high poverty rate and the presence of a youth homeless shelter within district lines, is "very disruptive to the school environment, and fosters resentment among some of the staff who feel like we are always picking up other people's problems," the counselor said.

The guidance counselor was impressed by an alternative program offered through the school that services approximately 120 students, half in-town students and half school-choice and out-of-home youth. The program, which runs in the evening, "is often the choice for many students who deal with truancy, tardiness, behavior, or work issues," he said. Graduates can either earn a high school diploma or a high school adult education diploma, depending upon the coursework completed. The counselor felt confident that the school was slowly building its support services, but acknowledged that many students facing personal crises are simply referred to outside agencies.

No school official believed homelessness was a large or serious problem at their school, and they could offer few details about how their schools dealt with the issue when it did arise.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a widespread misconception among policymakers, legislators and the public about who homeless youth actually are. They are not, by and large, teenagers sitting with their parents in homeless shelters. Nor are they predatory adolescents stalking schools and city streets with guns. They are, in fact, something much more complex: troubled teenagers, frequently with lengthy histories of abuse, neglect or abandonment, who, for one reason or another, are living on their own. Some homeless teens are essentially homeless by choice; that is, they have run away or exhibited such serious behavior problems at home that their parents have turned them over to the state, at least for a time. Some are veterans of the foster-care system and have virtually no say about where or with whom they live. Still others are in such conflict with their parents that they are simply kicked out. But no matter what their backgrounds - whether they are among the street homeless or foster-care homeless, whether they are complicit in their own homelessness or not - such teens deserve sympathy and respect. **The duty of adults is to recognize that such adolescents almost always become homeless as a result of adult dysfunction, and thus are victims of processes they did not create and would not have wished for.**

Foster-care youth are often indistinguishable from more traditionally homeless youth - except for their educational histories, which generally are even more disjointed. If foster-care youth were covered by McKinney, they could more easily enroll in new schools and take advantage of McKinney-funded programs where they exist.

Of everything our research reveals about the educational status and chances of young people, the thing it most clearly reveals is that as currently implemented and enforced, Title VII-B of the McKinney Act is ineffective in helping many, and probably most, of them to finish school. The following list of recommended changes to the McKinney Act should not be considered all-inclusive. Instead we address only the problems that arose most frequently in conversations with youth and others, and that seemed most likely to have policy solutions. We separate our recommendations into two categories, one focusing on simple amendments to federal law that should be made immediately, and the other on fundamental changes that, while more costly, would truly change the lives of homeless young people. It is our position that both sets of changes should be made during the upcoming reauthorization of the EHCY.

FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES

- **McKinney should be fully funded at the level authorized by Congress in 1990: $50 million.** In light of the fact that the number of homeless children and youth has grown dramatically in recent years, that only 3 percent of all local educational agencies in the country receive McKinney funds, and that many McKinney coordinators have insufficient administrative funds to implement effective statewide programs, this figure is reasonable and necessary. Growing societal fears of underclass youth and a federal budget surplus that could easily accommodate such funding make an increased allocation even more sensible.

- McKinney should recognize that the needs of homeless adolescents are fundamentally different from the needs of homeless children. Homeless youth are almost always without a responsible parent; they have run away, been kicked out or are otherwise estranged from their families. Thus, they are forced to solve basic life problems, such as where to live and how to feed themselves, on their own. A program that simply supplies afterschool tutoring is obviously not going to be particularly helpful to such young people. **For homeless youth, McKinney should do two things: 1) fund aggressive outreach programs so that these youth, who often do not present themselves to school officials or social services agencies on their own, can be located and 2) allow McKinney-receiving schools to use**

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their funds for comprehensive case management services for homeless youth. Such case management services should include assistance with housing problems, help securing food and other necessities and the provision of clean clothes and school supplies. Without these fundamental services, homeless youth will almost certainly drop out of school.

- For the purposes of the McKinney Act, the federal Department of Education defines a homeless youth as one lacking fixed, adequate and regular housing, but exempts youth in foster care. But foster-care youth are often indistinguishable from more traditionally homeless youth - except for their educational histories, which generally are even more disjointed. The following factors put foster-care youth at special educational risk.

  1. Because they are harder to place in foster homes than younger children, education is never factored into a placement. Furthermore, such youth frequently have moved to four or five homes (and thus schools) in a period of just a few years. Such forced moves are extremely damaging to academic progress: indeed, research indicates that three to six months of schooling is lost with every relocation.

  2. Research also indicates that adolescents with histories of abuse (i.e., teens in foster care) suffer from an array of psychological, personality and behavioral problems that adolescents without histories of abuse do not (Grilo, Sanislow, Fehon, et al, 1999). Therefore, foster-care youth in school tend to have more problems, either academic, behavioral or emotional, than do other children, and thus fall behind more quickly.

  3. Teens in foster care have the same problems with access to public school that homeless teens do; they too frequently lack documentation, have missing credits and disjointed attendance records.

  4. Schools often are reluctant to take youth involved with state social service systems because they believe such youth will be in any particular school only temporarily. Furthermore,such youth often have behavioral problems stemming from their difficult backgrounds, and such problems tend to spike during transitions to new schools.

For all these reasons, the federal DOE should issue new and firm guidance to states expanding the eligibility of foster-care youth for EHCY programs. The policy change would mean that such youth would: 1) be able to enroll in public school more easily and 2) have access to McKinney-funded programs in the districts where they exist.

- McKinney guarantees homeless children and youth equal treatment in all public schools, but provides extra support programming in only 3 percent of school districts. In the rest, it seems to optimistically assume that equal treatment will somehow yield equal outcomes. Research shows indisputably that it does not. Because homeless and foster-care youth suffer disproportionately from abuse and neglect, and because abuse is known to contribute to behavior and learning problems, equal is not good enough. Just as learning-disabled students have a legal right to an array of support services not available to other students, so should homeless youth - and in all districts, not just a few. **Youth who are deemed to be homeless should be allowed to: 1) enroll in school immediately, even if previous school records or other documentation cannot be found; 2) stay in their school of origin if they choose to, regardless of school policy, and with states rather than individual districts picking up the tab for transportation; and 3) be allowed to attend the nearest appropriate school, whether it is within their district or not. This provision is vital for students who need an alternative school setting but don't happen to have**

McKinney should recognize that the needs of homeless adolescents are fundamentally different from the needs of homeless children. Homeless youth are almost always without a responsible parent; they have run away, been kicked out or are otherwise estranged from their families, and thus must learn how to survive on their own.

Homeless teenagers should be allowed to attend the nearest appropriate school, whether it is within their local district or not. This provision is vital for students who need an alternative school setting but don't happen to live in a district that offers one.

such a school in their own district.

- **State McKinney coordinators must be given substantially greater means of enforcing McKinney, particularly in those districts that do not receive special funds and thus do not consider themselves accountable to the EHCY provisions. Schools showing a pattern of noncompliance with the law should risk loss of accreditation or per-pupil attendance funding. The federal DOE should also offer states greater resources and assistance in carrying out enforcement duties.**

- **McKinney should prohibit any homeless youth from being forced by lack of options into alternative education programs, and should require states to improve alternative programs for youth who choose to attend them.** The central assumption of McKinney is that homeless children and youth are best educated in mainstream schools rather than in segregated programs that separate them from their non-homeless peers. But by definition, adult education and GED courses, the two educational alternatives most used by homeless youth who drop out of school, *are* segregating. Students in GED programs tend to be either socially or academically marginal, and often participate in either unstructured or one-on-one GED courses that deprive them of a diverse, mainstream peer group. Though such programs often serve youths' immediate needs, providing a vehicle for academic success otherwise unavailable to them, in the long run the benefit of such programs is questionable. While GED programs vary widely in quality, research has found that the marketability of GEDs is poor and that recipients go on to college far less often than their peers who graduate from regular high schools (Mass. Statewide Steering Committee for At-Risk and Out-of-School Youth, 1999). Adult education courses, which may either culminate in a GED degree or high school diploma, are geared to older people, not to teenagers still wrestling with the developmental issues of adolescence. Because the core value of McKinney is being violated by these facts alone, **a reauthorized Act should require states to standardize and academically improve GED courses, link GED curricula to normal high school curricula, and require the programs to collaborate with high schools and post-secondary schools. States should also establish that any adult education program utilized by youth is in fact appropriate for them.**

SIMPLER, LESS COSTLY CHANGES

- **McKinney should require that states make serious efforts to educate all shelter personnel and schools about rights/obligations under McKinney, and to prove that they have done so. An obvious first step would be the posting of notices in all schools and shelters.** States should also be required educate schools and shelters about schools' obligations under **state** regulations, which are often spelled out in far greater detail. Though McKinney already asks state coordinators to perform these functions, in reality coordinators do minimal outreach. This fact explains why no school official interviewed for the current study knew what the McKinney Act required of schools, and none could say how their school identified or served homeless students.

- **School districts applying for McKinney grants should be required to show that they have done substantial planning with local shelter and youth-serving agencies and intend to work collaboratively with them.**

- **We agree with the President's proposal that every school district in the country have a homeless student liaison,**

but would add a requirement that such liaisons be thoroughly trained in both McKinney and in state regulations on the education of homeless youth. These liaisons should also be required to develop collaborative relationships with homeless shelters and use programs in their districts. **Furthermore, liaisons should receive specialized training in the issues of adolescence.**

- **Every state should have a full-time McKinney coordinator.** In New England, one state coordinator spent only 10 percent of her time on McKinney-related matters, and thus did no outreach or education at all. Others acknowledged that they felt forced by lack of time into a reactive rather than proactive role, meaning they responded to phone calls but did little else. **A full-time coordinator could - and should be required to - do extensive outreach to all schools, not only to educate them about their obligations under McKinney, but to check that they are in fact adhering to the tenets of the law.**

- Two of the four McKinney coordinators we interviewed acknowledged that McKinney works better for children than for youth. Their observations are consistent with a well-known bias in favor of services for children that has long existed in state social service agencies. Because teenagers are a more difficult population to serve, **McKinney coordinators should be required to show what percentage of their work they perform with each population, and, if adolescents are underrepresented, to describe the obstacles preventing services and a plan for overcoming them.**

- **McKinney should require the federal DOE to take over from the states the task of collecting data on the prevalence of homelessness among children and youth. The DOE could best collect reliable, uniform data by developing a standard survey technique that could then be applied by school districts on the local level. Data should also be collected on the number of foster-care youth living in each district. The federal DOE should be responsible for collating and analyzing the data, and for issuing guidance to the states based upon it.**

- Difficult life circumstances and shortage of school credits are the problems that most frequently prompt homeless youth to drop out of school. **McKinney should require that all schools, not only those few that receive McKinney funds, have some means - summer programs, after-hours classes, or alternative extra-credit assignments - of helping homeless youth who have missed periods of school catch up with their classmates.**

- **McKinney should require school districts to enroll homeless students immediately. Any disputes should be resolved within seven days, during which time the student should be allowed to attend school.** One youth in our study was kept out of school for five months, and some special education students have been kept out for as long as a year. The reasons for the delays include misunderstandings about which records are actually required for school enrollment; endless "team meetings" about individual education plans (IEPs); concern over whether a student "really belongs" in public school; and subtle discouragement from enrolling based on the school's assumption that a youth will be in town only a short time. Shelter personnel strongly feel that these delays are often transparent attempts by school systems to "wait out" a placement and thus avoid having to serve a potentially difficult or time-consuming student. Some also feel that homeless and foster-care youth are labeled in advance by schools, and thus end up receiving services they do not need and that keep them from a normal school experience.

McKinney should require that states make serious efforts to educate all shelter personnel and schools about rights/obligations under McKinney, and to prove that they have done so. They should also be required to inform shelter personnel and schools about their obligations under state regulations, which are often spelled out in far greater detail.

- McKinney guarantees homeless youth access to all programs and services normally available to other youth. Homeless youth should, for instance, be able to use library cards, join sports teams, participate in field trips and enroll in special courses such as drivers' education or culinary arts. In reality, however, homeless youth are sometimes refused admission to special classes and programs because of limited slots or extra fees, or because of the fear that they will leave before completing a semester and thus waste school resources. **McKinney must be more specific and forceful in its mandate that homeless youth be granted unquestioned access to all programs available to other youth, even when slots are limited or the activity requires a fee that a homeless youth cannot afford to pay.**

McKinney should require schools to enroll homeless children and youth immediately.

- Homeless children and youth are increasingly being segregated in special charter schools, public school homeless programs and school-endorsed shelter programs. This trend is an obvious cause for concern, and has prompted legitimate proposals that a reauthorized McKinney ban education programs designed exclusively for homeless students. However, for homeless teenagers, who face a particularly hostile reception in public schools, the effect of such a ban could be a gap in services. **If a ban on segregated education programs goes into effect, stricter enforcement of the provisions of the EHCY program would become a crucial protection for homeless adolescents attempting to finish school.**

FURTHER STUDY

Like all studies, this one has limitations. Though we gathered information about a diverse group of young people, the total numbers of subjects was small and all of them were teens connected in some way with social service agencies. Because it is likely that many, or even most, homeless young people never seek the help of such agencies, our sample is necessarily somewhat skewed. However, our conclusions - that McKinney, as currently implemented and enforced, is ineffective in helping these students enroll and succeed in school - would nonetheless seem valid. If anything, it is probable that a more representative group of homeless young people would be even less capable of coping with the demands than were our subjects. Still, the unique problems of homeless youth need to be more fully examined, especially since many towns and cities offer very few resources to teens in trouble, and in these places, large numbers of unidentified teens presumably go unmonitored and unassisted in any way.

Future study also should continue to solicit the opinions of homeless youth, and to treat their input as an important prerequisite to policymaking. Such research should focus not on the well-known academic and social deficiencies of many of these teenagers, but on the very real and even profound experiences and insights they can bring to mainstream educational settings.

Researchers should also delve more deeply into the problems of schools - the one constituency that, for institutional and legal reasons, feels unable to enter into honest dialogue about the burden that homeless and "systems" youth can represent. But until schools feel free to tell their own stories, policies that work for everyone can never be established or successfully implemented.

Particularly urgent topics for research are the effects of school violence on marginal student populations and the impact of new state testing schemes on schools' willingness to accept students with special needs or poor academic histories. New tracking needs to be done on who is getting into school, who is graduating from school, and what happens to "undesirable" students along the way.

Finally, the tasks given to the McKinney EHCY coordinators, the state officials who alone are responsible for implementing the many provisions of a complex federal law, must be examined. Insufficient attention has been given to their ability to carry out their duties, especially in light of other obligations, limited funding, lack of enforcement power, and lack of training in the issues of adolescence. In any state, they are the most important safeguard of the rights of homeless children and youth, but they cannot be expected to succeed in their roles unless states and the federal government make success possible.

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Appendix A

1997-98 McKinney Awards to New England States

	Massachusetts	Connecticut	Maine	New Hampshire	Vermont	Rhode Island
Total State Award[1]	$562,367	$284,513*	$100,000	$100,000	$100,000	$100,000
Number of LEAs funded[2]	12	16*	1	4	3	3
Total number of homeless children/youth in state (estimate)	5,869	5,090	8,337	1,285	800-1,000[4]	125
Total number of homeless children/youth served by McKinney funds	3,001	1,897*	240	118	199	125
McKinney sites	Barnstable; Boston; Brockton; Cambridge; Framingham; Lawrence; Lynn; Marshfield; Quincy; Springfield; Triton Regional; Worcester	Killingly; Bridgeport (2); New London; Hartford; Norwich; Norwalk; E. Hartford; Vernon; Project Learn; Ansonia; Bristol; Danbury; Middletown; New Haven; W. Hartford	Portland	Portsmouth; Dover; Nashua; Derry	Burlington (2); Winooski	North Kingstown; Pawtucket; Woonsocket
Current challenges[3]	Balancing siting of new family shelters with potential burden on neighborhood schools.	Lack of funding. Only 10% of school district and 37% of homeless children are served by McKinney programs.	Lack of funding to implement law; lack of awareness and identification of homeless children in rural areas.	Increase in number of homeless teens and extremely few shelter services for them.	Using McKinney resources creatively because of large geographic area.	Overloaded staff and no ability to replace departing staff.

Source: National Coalition for the Homeless, 1999

[1] Formula grants are made to the states on the basis of poverty rates.
[2] Local educational agencies.
[3] Selected, and as reported by state EHCY coordinators
[4] Vermont Office of EHCY Coordinator
* For 1998-99 school year.

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